

The Washington merry-go-round

Frost
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With LES WHITTEN

WASHINGTON — The Senate report on CIA assassination attempts has been held up while the senators make a final, probably futile effort to find out who authorized the plots against foreign rulers.

Still unresolved is whether past Presidents were aware of the murder plots. Did men like Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon sometimes behave in a manner more befitting a Mafia godfather than President of the United States?

There are two possibilities, both profoundly disturbing. Either the killings had presidential approval, or the CIA arranged them without authorization.

The evidence before the Senate Intelligence Committee is inconclusive. CIA officials, testifying in secret, denied getting any assassination orders from the White House. They admitted under cross-examination, however, that they would lie to protect the President.

The same witnesses also denied that the CIA had plotted to kill anyone without authorization. Yet they could never seem to identify who had granted the authorization.

This point is equally vague in the documents that the CIA delivered to the committee. Invariably, the secret memos dealing with assassination plots are unsigned. Some have a name typed

at the bottom; others bear no name at all.

There is some evidence that Presidents may have authorized the CIA's participation in an occasional coup of kidnaping. For example, President Kennedy apparently approved an August 23, 1963 cable directing the U.S. embassy in Saigon to arrange the overthrow of South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem.

There was also secret testimony that President Nixon personally gave CIA chief Richard Helms the green light to go ahead with the 1970 kidnaping of Chile's Gen. Rene Schneider. Nixon allegedly told Helms that Henry Kissinger would be his White House contact on the scheme.

But it was emphatically denied that the Diem and Schneider killings were ever part of the original plans. The Diem coup got out of control, and Schneider put up unexpected resistance, it was explained.

Hints were dropped that the White House wasn't kept entirely in the dark about the assassination plots. As one witness put it, the late CIA chief Allen Dulles informed Presidents of the dirty work by "circumlocution."

Most committee members reportedly believe that past Presidents approved, or at least condoned, the assassination plots but that no record was kept. This gave the Presidents what a draft report

calls "plausible deniability."

The draft report runs about 200 pages and is bound in a looseleaf folder. But pages are still being taken out to be rewritten. Key witnesses have also been called back for additional questioning. The assassination report may not be ready, therefore, until the end of the month.

However, here are the committee's preliminary findings:

—In 1960, the CIA plotted to do away with the troublesome Congolese leader, Patrice Lumumba. One method that was explored was poisoning. An official announcement claimed he was slain on Feb. 12, 1961 by Congolese tribesmen after his escape from prison. But according to one Bizarre, unconfirmed account, he was given only whiskey to drink and died of alcoholic poisoning. In any event, CIA witnesses denied that the agency had anything to do with his final demise.

—In late 1960, the CIA recruited two Mafia mobsters to knock off Cuba's Premier Fidel Castro. The attempts on Castro's life continued until the spring of 1963. Castro not only was aware of the attempts to kill him, the draft report notes, but also threatened to retaliate against U.S. leaders. The report offers no evidence, however, that Castro had anything to do with the subsequent assassination of President Kennedy a few weeks later.

—The Dominican Republic's late dictator, Rafael Trujillo, was censured by the Organization of American States in 1960 for sponsoring an unsuccessful assassination plot against Venezuela's President Romulo Betancourt. Although the OAS denounced the attempted murder as a flagrant violation of human rights, this didn't deter the Eisenhower administration from sponsoring plots to kill not only Castro but Trujillo. At least the State Department, in a clumsily coded message, directed its consulate in Santo Domingo to support a coup against Trujillo. Although the U.S. supplied the weapons, it is denied that the U.S. encouraged the assassins to gun down Trujillo as happened on May 30, 1961.

—Not only did a cable go out from Washington on Aug. 23, 1963, ordering U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge to seek the overthrow of South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem but some of the generals who participated in the coup were paid by the U.S. Two months later, on November 1, Diem was killed. Still, the key witnesses denied that the cabled orders were implemented.

—The 1970 kidnaping of Gen. Rene Schneider was intended, apparently, to touch off a coup that would block the late Salvador Allende from coming to power in Chile. Although President Nixon has been linked with the kidnap order, there is no evidence that this was intended to be an assassination plot.